Afterword: The Allure of Indigeneity

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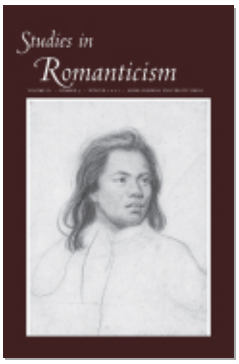

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Afterword: The Allure of Indigeneity

ROMANTIC POETS WERE OFTEN DRAWN TO INDIGENOUS CULTURES BECAUSE they believed Native people possessed what they themselves desired: a true connection to the natural world and an authentic self, ungoverned by polite society. For the most part they had little interest in the specifics of Native life and belief beyond that which they could aesthetically appropriate to lend power to their work, and indeed often had little sense of Indigenous people as fully realized subjects who were worthy of sympathy and solidarity. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey's fantasy of the Pantisocracy, a failed scheme for a radical utopian colony of emigrants in North America which turned into a settler colonial vision, highlights this lack of material concern or interest in the Indigenous inhabitants of that land.[1] Yet in creating their vision of Indigenous people as uncorrupted by modern, civilized society, as stoic yet tragic widows facing death, as vengeful warriors with bloody songs, or as mystic shamans seeing glimpses of transcendence, Romantic poets helped mythologize Native people in ways that continue to have material effects. This form of racialization is fundamental to settler colonialism; to paraphrase Patrick Wolfe, Native people were not thought of as the people who were the original inhabitants of the land in the Americas, with the right to autonomy and sovereignty that such personhood would guarantee, but as *Indians*.[2] And *Indians* are doomed to provide a moral lesson to the modern world by becoming its mourned victims.

The extractive approach to Indigenous people which the Romantics so keenly practiced still defines many relationships with Indigenous people, particularly in academia. More than ever, academics across disciplines are seeking out Native perspectives and expertise, and despite the collapse of the humanities job market there are North American jobs in Indigenous studies to perhaps compensate for the historic exclusion of Native people from our own study. Much of this has been done in the broader interest of diversity

1. See Tim Fulford, *Romantic Indians Indians: Native Americans, British Literature, and Transatlantic Culture, 1756–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 121–40.

2. Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388.

or "decolonization" in settler institutions. Yet neoliberal models of diversity rarely benefit Indigenous communities and instead mostly benefit individuals; this is not the fault of the Native academics who manage to find jobs or voices in academia. At the same time, there is a clear issue with people who have no connections to living Indigenous cultures presenting themselves as Indigenous voices within their institutions and fields. Recent scandals across a number of Canadian universities have highlighted this problem.[3] And this drive to present oneself as Indigenous, while no doubt done in part for cynical reasons to take advantage of this new demand, can also be tied to the Romantics, who imagined the Indigenous subject as authentic and desirable. To become Indigenous is to absolve oneself of the sins of modernity and settler colonialism, and perhaps more importantly to self-actualize in the most superficial sense.[4] And as with the Romantics, this displaces the needs of actual Indigenous communities in favor of individual experience.

Almost none of the efforts to decolonize or Indigenize fields, periods, and institutions impact the lives of Indigenous people, whose communities are typically the poorest in their respective countries and who suffer some of the worst health and social outcomes.[5] I sometimes wonder whether academic discourse merely serves to obscure this reality with a "feel good" performance of inclusion, of representation or reparative reading that ignores material conditions.[6] Critiques by Indigenous people within the academy can serve a similar function, speaking only to a rarified space that is keen to absolve itself through a performance of guilt or shame. None of this produces the necessary solidarity to change things through shared struggle. But then again, has academia ever produced this solidarity? Anti-colonial intellectuals such as Fanon believed that most academics were too beholden to the bourgeoisie and their own class positions to truly be capable of decolonization.[7]

3. See Ian Coutts, "Universities look to combat 'Indigenous identity fraud' after string of recent cases," *University Affairs* (February 16, 2022): https://www.universityaffairs.ca/news/news-article/universities-look-to-combat-indigenous-identity-fraud-after-string-of-recent-cases. See also Darryl Leroux, *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity* (Winnipeg, CAN: University of Manitoba Press, 2019).

4. See Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press); Fulford, *Romantic Indians*; and my own book, *The Savage and Modern Self: North American Indians in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018). See also Joanne Barker's chapter on "The Kinless Indian" in *Red Scare: The State's Indigenous Terrorist* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), 70–109.

5. For a global overview see Robyn Eversole, John-Andrew McNeish, and Alberto Cimadamore, *Indigenous Peoples & Poverty: An International Perspective* (London: Zedd Books, 2005).

6. For a critique of the turn to reparative reading see Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

7. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 11.

Perhaps we need to be more honest about the scope and limitations of academic work, and to focus less on positionalities or slogans and more on deeper intellectual engagement. I am also convinced by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's call in *The Undercommons* "to be in, but not of" the university, "to sneak into the university and steal what one can."[8] There are ways some of us can mobilize resources to materially help Indigenous nations, or at the very least to create forums and spaces to share ideas.

The field of Native American and Indigenous Studies has a rich and growing depth of thought, and shared panels at conferences or special issues such as this *Studies in Romanticism* forum, *Re-Indigenizing Romanticism*, edited by Elizabeth Potter and Nikki Hessell, can produce helpful dialogue. At the same time, based on my own experience at conference panels, it feels time to move past the rhetoric of decolonization or indigenization and into meaningful intellectual work. Indigenous people are not defined solely through colonization; our cultures offer powerful philosophies and knowledge that challenge the present dominance of capitalist and neoliberal logic.[9] In their critique of Enlightenment modernity, Horkheimer and Adorno famously begin their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant." In its most hopeful and radical light, Romanticism was, in part, responding to the instrumental reason of Enlightenment and attempting to recover humanity and nature from its "dark satanic mills" (Blake) and its cold rationality that could "unweave a rainbow" (Keats). It is unsurprising that many artists and writers would find in Indigenous people an aesthetic that challenged this disenchantment. Yet Romanticism is ultimately as much a product of Enlightenment as it is a response; Rousseau, after all, contains the seeds of both its primitivism and its radicalism.[10] Indigenous philosophies, by contrast, resist such legacies and critique the individualism that prevents holistic and structural understandings of phenomena. Indigenous languages such as Mi'gmaq are typically verb-based and relational, and express concepts and ways of being that

8. Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

9. See Kyle White, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55, no. 1–2 (Spring/Fall 2017): 153–62; Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 2000); Winonna LaDuke, *Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005); Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline* (London: Verso Books, 2019); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

10. For a compelling account of the Indigenous North American origins of Rousseau's thought and the Enlightenment, see Graeber & Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

participate in and produce a world in flux. To indigenize Romanticism in this sense would be to un-romanticize Indigeneity and to learn such Indigenous concepts, to deny the primacy of the individual, and to recover the collective responsibility we hold for one another and for all things.

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